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ANZAC Cove Evacuation 19/12/1915 ... one NZEF Soldiers Account

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Location:Brisbane
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Company, 1st Auckland
Infantry Battalion, NZEF
1914-1919

I tracked down the surviving letters of Cpl GGM Mitchell 12/2392 - 1st Auckland Infantry Battalion NZEF, as he had served with my Grandfather (Cpl George McLaren 12/2419) on Gallipoli and also initially in France .. as I am gathering any and all info I can on my grandfathers service.

Mitchell wrote a great account of the evacuation of ANZAC Cove on this day back in 1915. Plenty of good detail here for the Kiwi & Aussie Gallipoli enthusiast. Every time I read it .. I gain a little more insight.

It's a pretty long read but has exceptional detail and without further ado ...

*"26th Mar 1916 - Egypt
To my homefolk.*

*We have now been in our present location some 12 weeks, & today after putting away my self imposed task, telling myself I would await a more favourable opportunity.
I am going to try to tell you the story of the evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsular as I saw it.*

I am not going to deal with it as a journalist might with the scheme itself but just with the portions of the movement which came directly under my observation. In my pocket diary, I made at the time brief notes of the various happenings & in the course of this narrative I still have occasion to refer to them for those facts which for the present have escaped my observation.

My knowledge of the whole is perhaps not as good as yours, as you had the full account of the now famous evacuation from correspondents who were privileged to witness the carrying out of the whole thing, while I was limited in my range of observation to the proceedings around Anzac & Suvla Bay.

As we now know, but of which we were at the time totally unaware, Sir Ian Hamilton was asked by Lord Kitchener on the 9th Oct last if he could furnish the war department with an estimate of the casualties that would have to be incurred in evacuating the various positions on the Gallipoli Peninsular. Sir Ian still confident of victory (that costly word) while not refusing to give the statement required, demurred against the proposal & considered that it was inconceivable for us to even contemplate withdrawal after the

terrible sacrifices made to gain what he held, & especially when victory could still be ours if the war office could furnish another 75,000 men & the necessary munitions.

To this application Lord Kitchener replied, confidently pointing out the reason which rendered it impossible for munitions to be supplied & at the same time without further consultation, the great strategist "K of K" recalled him home.

On 16th Oct Sir Charles Munro was instructed to proceed to the Peninsular & arrange for the complete withdrawal from the Peninsular of all the English & Colonial troops. From the 16th onwards arrangements for the evacuation seemed to have gone steadily forward.

On the 9th Nov, the N Z Infantry Brigade & the Mounted Rifles left Lemnos, & arrived on the night of that day at Anzac Cove. Our ranks which had been so badly depleted during the battle of Sari Bair were once more strengthened & filled by the men of the 6th reinforcements Wgtn, Canterbury, & Otago infantry Btns who went immediately up Chalic Dere & relieved the 25th Btn of Australians on the Apex, directly facing the Turks on Chunuk Bair & Sari Bair.

The Auckland Battalions were assigned to the charge of Rhododendron Spur & Canterbury Slopes. The 6th Hauraki & 15th Nth Aucklanders went into permanent residence (in the trenches) on Rhododendron Spur & the Auck 3rd & 16th Waikato took over the farm trench (later known as the Manukau Rd trench) & the reserve trenches & dugouts on Canterbury Slope. Rhododendron Spur received its name during the terrible August days. Growing on the spur was a small plant with large clusters of berries, which at a distance looked like a flower not unlike the Rhododendron & hence the name.

After the height was captured, the error was found out, but the original name remained unaltered. Canterbury Slope was so named because it was the scene of a charge by the Canterbury Btn who captured the ridge & held it despite the Turkish attacks from Snipers Ridge & Walkers.

Throughout Nov & Dec no further attacks were made on our sector, although sniping was carried out day & night, while at the Apex the bomb throwers were continually busy on both sides. The Apex suffered most as far as casualties went, here bombs, shells, & rifle fire accounted for a number of our men.

All the time however we were as ready to attack as we were to resist one. To us ordinary soldiers it soon became apparent that our people had no evident intention of attacking. All our efforts being directed towards preparing the ground we held for an enemy attack.

With this end in view we worked night & day digging, sapping & improving those trenches we had already put in, with every known manner & device. We soon got things so well advanced that many of us looked forward to a Turkish attack when we reckoned on giving the enemy the fright of his life.

But Johnny Turk remained quiet in his trenches, about as afraid to attack as we were to attack him. Do not think the enemy was inactive all this while, for on the contrary he worked strenuously at his trenches, & threw sap after sap towards our lines & for every foot we mined towards him, he mined a yard towards us.

As day followed day we were amazed to see the amount of work the Turks put in on their ground. Our Howitzers would wreck their entanglements day after day, smash to atoms their elaborately constructed redoubts & observation posts, blow up yards of well fortified entrenchments, & generally damage them to such an extent as would have been expected

to rob them of all their powers of perseverance. But contrary to our expectations they never appeared to get downhearted & as fast as we blew up their works, they were as speedy in replacing & rebuilding them. We would watch a bombardment after 5 o'clock & go to bed chuckling over the mortification of Abdul, which we expected him to experience when he saw the wreckage the high explosive shells had wrought. We pictured him sitting down & wringing his hands in dismay & talking about giving up such an unequal struggle & strafing "Enver & the Kaiser"

Words cannot paint our surprise when we peeped over the parapet in the morning & beheld everything as it had been the previous afternoon, before our shells played havoc with Johnnys work. During the night, chancing our machine gun fire the enemy would toil away rebuilding & repairing for all he was worth & in the morning we could picture him smiling to himself at the consternation we would experience when we gazed down on Chunuk Bair. When we demanded to be told how it was possible for such a large amount of work could be done in a single night, we were told that it was all the work of slaves who were kept by the Turks simply for pick & shovel work. This experience was scoffed at by many, but whoever did the work, there was never a doubt as to the thoroughness of the job. Very little damage was done in our trenches & all our work was constructive. We had to work hard, even if we did not have to labour as hard as our enemy, & at night we manned our trenches or else did four hours fatigue digging.

From the 14th Nov it was very cold, & on the 27th of the month, we had our first fall of snow & to many reared in our gentle southern climate, that experience was none too pleasant. On the 28th instructions were issued for all work that could be held over to cease. Only two men per day were to work in each bivvy digging a tunnel. This tunnel was to be 30' deep & sinking into the earth at an angle of 45 degrees to the level floor. When all the tunnels had reached their full lengths a big recess was to be dug with tunnels leading into the other recesses.

By means of these catacombs it would be possible for us to take refuge from big shellfire & if a shell should penetrate into one recess the exits would be plentiful enough for all who survived to escape. One shell is able to carve a hole 15' deep & 45' in diameter. Digging these tunnels was hard work. We had short picks & shovels, we put the earth into biscuit tins to haul it out. We struck a layer of hard rock & had to do a fair amount of blasting to shift any quantity of it. At times we despaired of ever reaching the 30' mark, but information we received about Dec 5th urged us to greater efforts.

An Armenian Sgt gave himself up to our people. He was able to give our leaders some very important information, part of which was to the effect that the enemy was busy constructing heavy emplacements of solid concrete, & were daily awaiting the arrival of several big guns from Germany & Austria with which they intended to smash up our trenches.

We knew we were going to be let in for some heavy bombardments as our cousins in Flanders had been subjected to, & the coming of the "Jack Johnsons" was not relished by any of us. We worked on our excavations with renewed energy & so keen did everyone become that General Braithwaite himself came round & examined each bivvy, to see what

advancement we were making. We had to do four hours night work each, & the continual strain & worry began to show on the boys & signs of worn out bodies began to appear. Still we dug on.

The 6th Dec was a sad one. The "Golben" lying in the straights bombarded Lone Pine when the Australians were changing reliefs. Three hundred & fifty men perished in the trenches & like number were wounded. The disaster showed us what we could expect from the German guns then on their way to the prepared emplacements behind Chunuk Bair.

On the 10th Dec orders were issued instructing us not to fire a single shot on the 11th, & the following day the silence was uncanny, the batteries lay quiet all day. The warships moved further out into the Aegean Sea, but gave no signs of life. The 12th saw us blazing away at them as merrily as ever. A day or so later a similar order was issued & for 24 hours our people remained silent every- where. But we did not relax our vigilance, on the contrary we heavily manned our trenches & prepared for the enemy to attack. What did these long spells mean?. We could only guess, until we were told by our officers that the procedure we were following was being carried out to persuade the Turks to attack us, when we hoped to inflict considerable losses to them. We believed this story.

One night I was down on the beach & there met an Australian officer whom I met on the "Meganti" & questioned him on the silence of the previous 24 hours, he advanced as his opinion that the authorities intended to evacuate their positions on the Peninsular, & the silence on our side was a kind of feeler. If the Turks did not fire while we refrained from firing it was extremely unlikely they would attack us while we were silent because we were leaving the trenches unguarded. The fact that they did not come on, even if only to find out what was the matter was a hopeful sign for us. In spite of what this officer said I could not bring myself to believe such an awful thing that complete withdrawal was contemplated. I told the boys in the bivvy in the morning & like me they positively refused to believe that we were going to leave Anzac. But various signs began to be given us, which gradually led us to recognise that something important was in the wind.

On 4 pm on the 13th I see by my diary that a party of men of which I was one, went down to Anzac Cove on Artillery fatigue. That night four big howitzers were brought along by hand labour, & after tremendous efforts placed piece by piece on iron barges, which were lying about 20 feet away from the waters edge. It took 200 men 3 hours to get one gun onto the lighter, & by the time morning dawned we were tired to death.

The first streaks of light were accompanied by a reign of shells, high explosive & shrapnel, no shipping could be done during the day, we dragged our way home getting back to our trenches about 9 am. I forgot to say that during the early part of the night practically the whole of the N Z Medical Corps embarked on lighters for Lemnos.

There was no wind & the sea was calm. All night long the sound of hammering & the clatter of timbers was borne across the waters to us & in the morning we saw several temporary piers almost constructed. Even then we could not believe what did happen could happen, we saw millions of rounds being shipped away, but knowing the Allies were in a bad way for munitions in Serbia, we believed these munitions were bound for Salonika.

The afternoon of the 14th saw us once more on the beach assisting to load up the scores of lighters lying at the piers. As soon as darkness fell these lighters sneaked out quietly to where the big ships were awaiting their arrival. Between the hospital ships & the shore we could make out a number of black smudges, each one of which was a steamer, without a solitary light, waiting for stores or troops.

On the beach were immense stores of provisions under guard. But no guards could drive away the men who had toiled & fasted week in week out on the bare steep hills. In Anzac terms "Open slather" was the order of the beach. Everything we could lay our hand son we called "Backsheesh" & as we wound our weary way homeward, laden with clothing, biscuits, dried fruits, cloaks, salmon in tins, boots & razors we waved our baggage & yelled "Backsheesh Johnny" & every time we yelled our good fortune, more & more parties of Anzacs made off for the beach, intending to get some of the spoils before it was too late. All of us got Australian slouch hats & leggings, & rigged out in our new clothes we looked like new reinforcements.

The Indians were the most amusing of all. Each driver of a cart literally backed it into the stores & loaded it up, & drove off to his dugout. Ordinarily these fine men wear a light drill uniform, but at the time of which I write they were all equipped with Aussie uniforms, slouch hats, badges, leggings, riding trousers, & Garabaldi coats, only by their dark skins could one tell that they were not what their clothing represented them to be. They were very proud of themselves too & strutted around like gay peacocks.

That night was very cold, a keen polar wind was blowing & a fall of snow was expected. Still the sea remained calm the chug chugging of steamers resounded all over the waters of the cove. That night too we discussed seriously the question of the impending evacuation, & a show in the "bivvy" was strong against our departure. We still could not bring ourselves to believe that we were spending our last hours in our dear old home. Orders were given out that no man, was to leave lines & six of us were told off to act as bodyguard to the Colonel. While on guard in headquarters, so strong had our "backsheesh" instincts become, that we pilfered several tins of milk & jam besides a loaf of bread.

The 16th, dawn broke again with us on the beach, burying gear & rations which could not be taken away. A number of sick men were sent to Egypt & only the willing & fit ones were left. Most of us were worn out shadows, & were feeling miserable & haggard, which must not be wondered at seeing we had only slept & eaten at intermittent intervals, & were praying for a rest.

The Pioneers, Orderly room clerks, Quartermasters, & other details sailed for Lemnos at 7 pm. Things at the different piers at the cove were crowded with warships, steamers, launches, & lighters & at the time for the final departure was drawing near men were sent out in shiploads all day. "Beachy Bill" made things merry for us, but we managed to dodge him & his shells. Trawlers manned yesterday by fishermen of the North Sea & now men of the same type, crept in & out drawing the Turkish fire, thus enabling the barges & their human freights to get safely to their troopships which were to take them to Lemnos.

During the afternoon it was rumoured that the Auck Battn would leave that night, & hastily getting together all the eatables we could hastened home, in order ,if the rumour

proved true to pack up our valises. Our section commander Cpl Crawford was sent away by the Dr & I was promoted to Lance Cpl & took over the care of the section. We went to bed about 6 pm having found the rumour of an early departure false. Heavy firing from Walkers ridge broke our sleep, but were safe in our bivvies from flying bullets & slept pretty well indeed. About midnight the warship "Lord Nelson" & "Colne" broke their silence & bayed loudly for a few hours. The shells passed right over our heads, but the shrillest noise they made was like soft music to those who woke at rare intervals to listen to their screaming.

"Stand to" in the morning on the morning of the 17th was an order we did not hear at 6 am & many of us enjoyed the luxury of a lie in till 7 am. When the "mess orderlies" call aroused out the heavy eyed slumberers, "Something must have gone wrong" said McLaren, "otherwise they would not have let us lie in bed till 7 am". "No" said little Treverthon "we must be off I'm afraid. "Yes" I willingly replied, "it looks like it". The seven others in our bivvy greeted our remarks in silence, & we ate our breakfast in quietness.

An absolute calm prevailed on all fronts, even the Turks were as quiet as we were. At 8 am we were told off into parties & till 12 o'clock we were burying gear & rations. We threw all kinds of foodstuffs down the uncompleted tunnels in the Pioneers bivvys, clothing & equipment found a resting place. Then we threw in pans & dixies, after we had rendered them useless by knocking holes in them, & on the whole we heaved in a quantity of earth, & where there was anything to burn threw kerosene down the tunnels & burned anything inflammable.

Opposite the regimental quartermasters old store we dug an immense hole & heaved in sacks of oatmeal, sugar, tea, bacon, & other stores then carefully covered over the lot Down the Mule Gully, just below Table Top to gain which 10,000 men had to be killed or maimed, we buried hundreds of picks, shovels, hammers, axes, & other implements besides a lot of chemicals & medicines.

The Light Horse & the N Z Engineers left in the afternoon & lay on the beach waiting for lighters to take them off to the troopships. Everything that was portable in the bivouacs was taken outside & destroyed. We did not however interfere with the bivvies themselves, the only thing we did to them was to remove the sandbags on the corrugated iron & to remove the earth off the roofs.

When we constructed the bivvies many got iron & roofed them. In order that the enemy aeroplanes should not pick them out we threw earth over the roofs & weighed them down with sandbags which also served to stop the shrapnel. Now however we no longer desired concealment, & by removing the earth & sandbags allowed the German airmen to see that we were still in our positions all through the area we held.

We fellows in no 3 bivouac of no 1 platoon had not been lucky enough to get iron for our roof, & had had to tie our oil sheets together & stretch them over our roof. All round the edges of each oil sheet are large holes & you can imagine how the water poured in on us when the rain fell.

When the snow came, the wind blew it from the side of the hill onto our frail roof & all through the night one of us or sometimes two, had to get out & scrape the snow off, or else tie up the broken sides where the oil sheets had given way under the weight of the snow.

At 12 o'clock therefore Treverthon & I were coming home when we noticed a beautiful green tarpaulin cover over a bivouac which had been occupied by an Australian doctor.

We immediately scrambled up & removed the sandbags & earth, when we saw that it was doubled across its full width. Despite all the efforts we could not manage to clear the cover off its beams on which it rested, so we gave up the job until we could get some help.

In the afternoon we were told off in parties for different parts of the trenches. The main body of N Zers was to leave on Saturday morning & afternoon, the party I was told off for, would not leave until some time before midnight of Saturday 18th Dec. My party was not the last one, but consisted of a portion of the rearguard.

Now that we were sure that we were leaving there was manifest the feeling in the matter of who should be the last to leave. There was a great deal of heartburning apparent & this one & that one wanted to know the reason why so & so was in such a party. McLaren, Coulam & I of our sector had volunteered to stay until the last, but the nearest we could get was the second to last party. About 6 o'clock the orderly Sgt came round & told us that all orders had been cancelled as there was a likelihood of us having to stay a few days longer & as rain began to threaten. Treverthon, Broadly, Coulam, & I went down & after a struggle lasting over an hour we got the green tarpaulin to our bivvy, & that night turned in without a thought to trouble us.

I remember the keen feeling of satisfaction I felt when I awoke at about 2 am & heard the rain pattering down on our roof top. I was so pleased that I woke Cavanagh who slept next to me & told him to listen to the rain. As he had not laboured as I had to put the roof there, all I got from him was a flow of improper language, common enough to soldiers, & a command to go back to sleep. I had my reward the next morning when a dozen or so dripping men came in to take shelter in our bivouac & I was complimented for my foresight. I swelled visibly with all the praise I got.

Sat the 18th saw us roll up our blankets & send them away on mules, which were to take them to the piers. Today we said "will be the last clear day". Trevarthon got his camera out & snapped everything within range, while other lads developed the artistic sense & sketched trenches, posts, bays & hills. All morning we carried on the work of burying everything we could not take away, & thousands upon thousands of rounds of ammunition went into great holes 20 feet deep. Up & down from trench to trench we went & removed hundreds of boxes from carefully prepared recesses. Hand grenades & flares were all brought out & cast into pits. In every recess we left a dozen percussion bombs, & a half dozen mills hand grenades & a thousand rounds of ammunition. This was done in order that the rearguard would commence its retreat from the Apex.

The Apex was about 2 miles from the shore & by far the furthest point our people held. You will see therefore that in having to retire from such an advanced point the N Z-ers had a dangerous task before them, but the boys reckoned it was an honour & appreciated the chance which resulted in the capture of the Apex & entitled us to hold it until last. The Australians held the nearest point to the beach, a point known as Russells Top.

During the hour that remained to us between 4-5 pm we made final arrangements, had tea, & prepared to take up our positions in the advanced line of trenches. We had to wait however for a number of our men. The boys had been doing nothing else all day but walk up & down the paths of "Mule "Gully" carrying picks & shovels being all the time in full view of the enemy, who sent over any number of shrapnel shells from which they had to take shelter in the deserted bivouacs. By altering the size of the party & pretending to work in various places, commencing new trenches & saps, it was intended to convey to the enemy our intention of making a long stay. There is no doubt that the enemy was completely deceived by this policy.

However about 6 o'clock carrying our full packs, our party numbering about 30 under Lieut Wynne Grey who was in the same form at school as I was, found ourselves settled down at E1 post on the advanced point of Rhodedendron Spur. Three of us were told off to take up a position in an observation post which while a good "possie" commanding an excellent view of the enemies trenches opposite us, had one great disadvantage in that it could be continually swept by Turkish machine guns, from both front & rear.

As soon as we had got our bombs ready, & fixed our bayonets, & charged our magazines, we divided the twelve remaining hours till morning into shifts, each working 2 hours on & 3 off. It was not quite dark when I climbed up onto the fire station & commenced to protect the sentries head from bullets coming from either front or rear. The movement of the boys must have been detected by some sharp eyed Turk, the buzz & whining of bullets just above my head made me duck, while one or two nearer the mark tore long strips out of the sand bags.

After that I decided that I would wait until nightfall before I touched that bag again, & the occasional hail of bullets against our parapet made me glad that I had done so. . We each had a long look through the loopholes for the flashes from the gun, but could not pick it up at all. It evidently being well concealed. We were visited every half hour by an officer in order to see that every man was awake & keen on the lookout, but there was no need to worry about the kind of lookout we kept. We could see moving forms all over the hills, although the night glasses determined them to be bushes

Somewhere ahead of us we could hear the clang of spade & pick, we knew that the enemy sappers were running out a sap by means of which they could attack us in our trenches.

We all laughed softly to ourselves as we pictured the dismay on Abduls face when he ventured to charge into our empty trenches. How dearly we would have loved to see him in the empty dugouts.

About 3 o'clock a listening patrol went out in front of our post, & after that we were not so anxious. On our left however the mystified Turks sent out a patrol also, & they crept unobserved right up to our trenches, but a bomb from a surprised sentry scattered them right & left. They went back to report our trenches strongly held. No wonder we read now that their officers were considerably perplexed & unable to explain the reason behind the departure of thousands of troops under their very eyes. They feared another attempt on our part to pierce the Peninsular at some unexpected point & hence distributed their troops to the places most likely to be attacked.

We heard at the time that our aeroplanes had been over the straights for a whole day & saw thousands of Turkish troops on the move, & it was reported that they were leaving the

place as fast as we were.

Morning broke on the 19th Dec on a dismal looking prospect, & once again we realised we would be called on to make a move on Sunday. Sunday seems to be the day most things happen to us, & we have noticed the Sabbath day was the one chosen for all our important moves. I do not know the reason why, but the fact remains that what I have stated is so.

At 6 o'clock we came off our post & moved up to another fire station where we had an excellent view of the saps & trenches on Chunuk Bair.

The exchange of fire was kept up merrily until dinnertime, & as far as we were concerned no casualties were recorded. About 20 of us were told off to snipe at the enemy from as many posts as possible & we had 2 hours on & 2 hours off. We all hoped we had better luck with us.

We had just sat down to a dinner of biscuits & water when we heard an uncommon noise quite close to us. "Hello" said one of the boys, "Our batteries are putting in some high explosives, lets see where we hit them". His words were followed by a terrific explosion about 20 yards below us. We were struck dumb, "Why said someone", & there was a queer note in his voice, "The Jackos are shelling us". His words were hardly out of his mouth, when in a minute or two we were sure of it. The enemy gunners shortened their range & looking down the sap, we saw the next one strike our old store & the place was wrecked in the twinkling of an eye. The next one fell 20 yards shorter & our headquarters was as though it never had been. This was growing alarmingly, & we left off eating our lunch. Two more pitched into our cookhouse & only a heap of iron & bursted sandbags remained to mark the best constructed cookhouse on Canterbury Slope.

By this time we realised that there was never a truthful man if the Armenian Sgt was not one, & the German guns had arrived in more senses than one, & it was apparent to even the dullest of us. We soon saw that if the range was shortened 20 yards or so after every shell, we would be catching it hot. I laugh now when I think of it, but a lot of badly scared rabbits scuttling into their warrens were not half so ludicrous as we men rushing hither & thither & unable to find a tunnel which was clear of debris.

There was nothing for it but to stay & chance what came. As we feared another 20 yards was cut off the range & the explosion was so terrific, that every man standing in the trenches was knocked backwards. I fell against the wall & all the wind was knocked out of me.

We heard the next one dropping down & shaken as we were, we rushed up the trench in order to be away from the explosion, it burst right behind us, we heard another one coming. Away we rushed & rushed into half a dozen men running towards us. It was funny, we wanted to go up, they wanted to go down, & while we argued another shell smothered us with dirt. Personal recriminations followed & we were badly rattled. It was a new experience & an uncanny one.

"

What rotten luck", said Bill Hill to me, "if one gets knocked out after coming as far as this" I agreed with him. Over came another & we dodged this way & that. It was really amusing. Corp Adams heard the next one & dropped on his knees, pipe in his mouth. Half a dozen lads came rushing around from the next "possie" & unheeding Jack rushed over him a struggling heap of humanity. Poor Adams had his pipe pushed down his throat & he

indignantly extricated himself from the heap & expressed a horrible desire to murder the whole crowd. Hill & I soon recognised that it was fruitless to attempt to avoid the shells raining around us. We just got onto a fire station & stayed there throughout it all. I hope that I shall never tremble like I did that day. Bill Hill got tired of standing & set off for his dugout he had just left me when a shell blew his dugout to pieces, crumpling up the 8" beams like matchwood & burying all his gear beyond hope of recovery. Portions of the trenches were blown in & soon it became impossible to get from one trench to another, still the "whizzbangs" flopped in. Among us was one brave lad, his name was George Swann, a North Auckland farmer. The Turkish soldiers, evidently very pleased at the way we were being bombarded, kept on coming out & exposing themselves in order to observe the effects of their fire. Throughout the whole time we were being shelled, George never left his post, & fired steadily at the venturesome Turks. "Ill teach you blighters to come out" he kept on yelling, & a few shots scattered them, only to Georges exasperation to see them reappear at some other point. Some of us had a look at them, but we were too unnerved to do any shooting & Swann had all the pleasure on his own.

The men of the Apex were also out watching the fire, but the Turks could not see them. The trenches at the Apex were quite safe as the enemy could not shell them without risk of damage to their own works opposite the Apex. Our people told us afterwards that they did not expect to see one of us come out alive, having in mind the terrible slaughter on Lone Pine Ridge where hundreds were buried alive. In all we estimate the enemy put in 90 shells in 2 hours, & had the trenches been fully occupied, the roll of honour would have been considerably swollen. Fortunately all the 15th North Auck. Coy were then down on the beach & there were only 30 of us running any danger. As soon as the shells ceased we set to, to clear paths through the wrecked saps, working quarter hour shifts. We had to dispose of the earth in such a manner as would effectively repair the trench, & at the same time give the enemy no means of discovering what damage had been done to us.

Scarcely had the shelling finished than Major Alderman issued orders for all earth to be scattered along the trench, & for the snipers to keep up a steady fire on the opposite trenches. We were more concerned than ever to convey the impression that there were as many men in the trenches as at any other time, although we could not but feel that the enemy must been puzzling hard as to what the continued passage of boats to & fro all day must have meant.

We knew that if the conviction was fully borne in upon him that we were really about to evacuate, he could attack with such strength as would have meant our annihilation. As the hours passed however, we grew more & more certain of our ability to get out of it without having to fight, & this worry being off our minds we were able to dwell on other things.

Towards 3 o'clock after having shelled Walkers Ridge Courtneys Post, & poor battered Lone Pine, the enemy turned his attention to our no 2 outpost where Divisional Headquarters had its location a day or two previously. A hospital had its situation to the left of headquarters, but the new guns soon forced our people to shift the hospital. The Turks had no intention of shelling the hospital, but those shells that missed Divisional Headquarters were sure to find a resting place in the vicinity of the hospital, & in one day several poor fellows unable to leave their beds were killed. The shelling of headquarters was continuous for an hour or so but beyond blowing up the cable station & smashing up a lot of stones,

little result attended their efforts.

Down on the beach, as we could see, the work was going steadily forward & strings of mules were passing back & forth. Straight in our rear was Mule Gully, which was as open to the Turks as it was to us, & continually swept by their fire. Down there at a particularly dangerous point, my section mates were digging a deviation sap, which had been commenced several weeks earlier & was intended to make that portion of the gully less dangerous. The sap was only three parts finished & during its construction the parties working on it had been subjected to a very hard time, as all the men had to work in full view of the enemies guns & few relished being detailed for the job.

The climbing up the hill on the way home was quite bad enough without having to pick & shovel all day & being continuously swept by their fire, as we came off our posts to have a spell from the sniping of the enemy saps, we strolled down & tried to pick up the boys in the deviation sap with our glasses. We could see their picks & shovels glinting in the stray sunbeams that filtered through the lowering clouds behind Imbros, & later on we saw them file out with rifles slung & strolling up the gully.

This was superb folly but a magnificent bluff, & not knowing what we knew, they argued as has since been admitted, "Those fellows have got a lot to do to those saps before their armies pass through in safety. They will not move until they have finished all those exits to the beach. We will wait until they are just about complete & then we will attack". Good logical reasoning, but how they would have opened their eyes had they seen Lieut Moore-Jones head the sappers up the gully until a fold in the hills hid his party from the watching Turk & then turn up a side track & move along a secret sap towards Anzac Cove, where he came out at Watson's Pier & rested there, awaiting the cover of night for his men to move out to the transport.

When we saw them disappear we knew we would not see them again for a day or two. We believed then that some of us were bound to go to Lemnos, but all were certain to land sooner or later at Salonika about 6 hours away from Lemnos.

At 5 o'clock the sun began to sink fast behind Imbros, we went to our stations & packed up those parts of our gear that had been removed while we were moving about the trenches. Word was passed along to us to get ready, while a sharp lookout was kept. Just a few minutes after 5 pm I fired my last shot at the enemy & then cleaned my rifle. 5.30 saw Mr Gray come along with the various members of his party & we joined him at E1 post.

I have told you that the cookhouses were blown to pieces, but one cook clung to the ordinary routine of his working day. This was a Hokianga chap named Ken Sutherland, of the 15th North Auck Coy. In company with all the battalion cooks he had received orders to move down to the beach in the morning, but he preferred to stay & see if he could do any- thing for the boys, as he put it. He had not left his cookhouse above 3 mins when a big shell dropped right into it & his cookhouse was no more. Nothing daunted he went down to the Waikato cookhouse & fishing some dixies out of a rubbish tip he plugged up the holes in them, & got some water & he soon had a merry fire going, & sent word that

he was sorry for the delay, but would do his best for us.

Just as we were about to bid farewell to Rhododendron Spur we heard him call for a couple of men. Half a dozen rushed off & soon came back with a dixie of stew & 4 dixies of tea.

We gave him a cheer & sat down to a surprise meal. Good old Ken. I shall always cherish a warm spot in my heart for his big heart & dauntless courage. Such men as Sutherland give us cause to remember that even though the sands of time are running fast we shall breed Englishmen, & can still make war.

This cooks spirit could not be but infectious & we who lay in the trenches & trembled, felt ashamed when we thought of Sutherland, telling himself that we were not going to be without a drink of tea, at least, & to see the work of hours performed go up in smoke, & to think how he set to work again chancing his life all the time, built fresh fires, & carried water up that steep slippery path where mules had failed to find a footing many a time. Gathering his dixies from near & far, opening bully beef tins, whistling serenely, his curly black hair bobbing up & down as he moved over the face of the slope, laid as good a tea before us as we ever got on the Dardenelles. I say that such men as Ken Sutherland are the rightful medal winners & should be honoured by their country.

After we had finished our meal we smashed our dixies, slung our packs on our backs, grasped our rifles & moved out of the trenches. As we passed along we read again some of the messages we had written & placed on the walls for Johnny Turk to read. We hoped he could read English as none of us knew a word of Turkish. Some of the messages were really humorous, others were pleased to express their appreciation of Johnny as a fighting man, & other messages would not stand repetition anywhere, let alone in a family letter to home such as this.

We filed down the sap & observed a great blaze on the beach, & the darkening west glowed with a red tint as does the sky in N Z when bush fires rage. We wondered what that great flame meant. Could it be that our people were already destroying the stores on the beach, or was it that a Turkish shell had set some flammable stuff alight. We were much perturbed, although we knew that large quantities of benzine & kerosene had been landed & spread around in order to make sure of everything being destroyed.

We could not understand why, when our safe withdrawall seemed to be so near, a little restraint could not have been exercised & the fires saved until the last minute. We imagined the bitter thoughts in the hearts of our comrades who were to still remain on the Apex. The Turks also wondered what the fires meant, & concluded that their shells had done the damage & accordingly rained over shell after shell onto the stores.

We learned afterwards that the fire was due to an accident which was aggravated by the benzine, & was a source of great worry to the Generals who thought their final plans were about to be upset. However the enemy contented himself with shelling & let it stay at that. This was most fortunate for us, as had they attacked we would have had go back & stay in the trenches until the advance party reached us. Indeed not one man seemed to have known what was really intended should be done in case of attack, I am afraid it would have been "Rafferty Rules" all through & it would have been "Save yourself, who can". That is not a very noble or heroic motto but the only one I can think of which applied to our situation.

Opposite our old bivouacs we stopped & organised ourselves into parties, & as soon as the last machine gun had been removed from its possie we filed off down the sap towards Chailik Dere. As we crossed over the ridge above Table Top, Colonel Plugge who was staying until the last said goodbye to each of us, & we all wished him a safe passage through, when it came to his turn to follow in our footsteps. At the foot of Chailik Dere we turned for the last time & looked up the Apex & Chunuk Bair, where so many hopes had been born & died almost stillborn.

Then we set our faces towards the sea, & keeping well under cover made good progress towards the beach. All the way down the sap, the graves of our men marked the track.

Some had tombstones, some had nude crosses of stone or wood & others were quite unmarked.

Here & there a sprouting plant showed up above the earth & we knew that some day every bush would denote the resting place of some soldier who laid down his life that his nation might live.

I am afraid we were a sad party, quiet, perhaps a little rebellious as we looked on those graves, we could not help feeling sorrowful, & as we whispered to one another saying, "Who will revenge all those brave lads, now we turn our backs on the foe, & leave them sleeping under the sod". Yes, who but we should avenge them, & we were soon to be out on the sea, sailing away from that land, that by right of occupancy if not by conquest, had been ours for 9 months.

We asked ourselves what would be thought of us at home, & we felt that many a heart there would receive a blow almost as severe as the death of the lad whose body we were bidding farewell to. We knew the news would be badly received, but we felt somehow everyone would realise that out of the colossal blunder some good would surely come, as all the world was called upon to recognise that speaking one language we were no longer Irish, Scotch, Australian, or New Zealanders but citizens of one Empire, one people, & one flag.

What has England done for you that you should go & fight for her, had been asked of many a dead lad & there was his answer -- his grave in a barren land to prove that it was not England he fought for, but his ideals, his race, & his Empire. As we moved along I recited to those nearest to me the verse from Rupert Brookes, "Soldier" which is as follows.

*If I should die, think only this of me,
that there is some corner of a foreign field,
that is forever England.*

*There shall be in that rich earth
a richer dust concealed,
gave once her flowers of love,
her ways to roam*

*A body of England's, breathing English air,
washed by rivers & best by sons of home.*

That poem said I, is what I would like to see on every soldier's grave on the Peninsular, & the boys endorsed my remarks.

After an hour or so, we passed out of the sap crossed to open space where the 5ths had suffered so terribly & reached a temporary resting place opposite no 2 outpost, almost on the spot where we had halted almost 5 months before on our way to the battle of Sare Bair, along the beach from Suvla Bay & the chocolate hills where the troops were marching, thousands of them & scarcely a sound to denote their presence. Alongside us 2,000 Ghurkas were resting, yet we were not aware of them in the dark until they got up & began to march away. We followed them, but our progress was slow. Every foot of ground seemed to be covered with men, & we saw we were in for many hours of dreary waiting, before we could get aboard a lighter. Still we pressed steadily forward, & gradually drew nearer to the beach, stores, & pier where the shells continued to whizz over.

Somehow we soon won our way through the crowd & about 9 o'clock rested again opposite Watson's pier & prepared to bivouac until we were called.

The piers had been covered with sandbags in order to deaden the sound of marching feet, & the precaution taken was fully justified by the absolute quiet that rested over everything. Now & again an engine chugged & then relapsed into silence as she cleared the wharf with her human cargo, & made off to the open waters of the Aegean Sea.

A little after 9 o'clock we were awakened from our slumbers & put our gear on once more. Silently like those who had preceded us we marched along the wharf & got aboard the big steel lighter, almost before we were aware of it, we were out & saw the few necessary lights of Anzac growing dimmer behind us. Our eyes were turned towards the Apex once we were aboard our transport & our ears had to do duty for our eyes.

In a minute or two we saw a trail of sparks high up in the air, & a dull boom followed. We knew then that our Sgt Francis, our expert bomber was not allowing Johnny Turk to think we were away from our trenches. Boom! Boom! Boom! bomb after bomb. Francis was sustaining his reputation for courage & audacity. I believe he threw over 80 bombs that night & the Turks toiled hard all night throwing out barbed wire entanglements, believing that the bomb attack might be followed by a bayonet attack. It sounds funny enough now, but it could not have had a single humorous point for both sides on the Apex that night.

Towards midnight having all the troops our ship could carry, we steamed away to Lemnos. Nearly all of us conquered our desire to sleep & stayed up on deck to see the last of Anzac. The final glimpses we had were of the occasional lights on the hills & high in the sky, still hurling defiance, flew the trail of sparks followed by the boom of the bomb, that told us all was well with those who covered the retreat of tens of thousands. That sight gave us hope & we lay down & slept peacefully until morning. We woke to find us in Mudros harbour. The sun was bright & high when we climbed upon the deck, for our people knew that we were dead tired & let us sleep until it was really necessary to remove us into lighters to the shore. As we pushed off from our transport I discovered the name for the first time. She was named the "Ermine" which contrasted strangely from her first sombre grey colouring.

There was a keen wind blowing when we stepped ashore but light heartedly we set off on our trek to our temporary camp at Mudros, East about 2 miles away. We had no blankets

with us & very little food, & we reckoned we were in for a miserable time when we discovered the camp consisted of only bare tents.

However having been complaining long enough we stood on no scruples about honesty, the whole Coy practically set out for an Australian camp about a mile further down the road. The Australians pointed out the stores tents, a few minutes & we were inside heaving blankets out onto the road, where they were quickly picked up & moved to a small gully.

There we hid them, while the good natured open hearted Australians on guard told us it would be safe to leave them there, as they would keep a watch over them. At nightfall we were back again in a body, & each man taking as many blankets as he could carry, returned to our cheerless camp. On the way home we met some Army Service Corp carts & a driver gave us a box of candles.

Previous to this, a number of parcels had come in & when these had been distributed, we lit the candles, spread the blankets & settled down to enjoy ourselves, while the merriment was at its height, someone came in & gave us a couple of oranges apiece. We had a feast. I know this story should end here, but the facts of real life cannot be over- looked, as we found out.

The sudden change to rich food after the long spell of biscuits & bully beef stew proved to be our undoing. For my part I had a fearful attack of indigestion, & nearly every man in my tent was sitting up half the night rocking, himself to a range of expressions hitherto undreamed of in them. So engrossed have I been in thinking of my experience with the cakes & sweets that for a minute or two I completely forgot to tell you of the doings of the men of our infantry brigade who had been left on the Apex when we steamed away from Anzac. All day long we anxiously inquired for them, but we could learn nothing of them until about 4 pm when we heard a warship had come into the harbour & just on 5 pm we were delighted to see the little party swing along the road. As they marched into camp we turned out & cheered them heartily. They had left the trenches about 2 pm on the 20th Dec & had escaped without a single casualty.

The 21st & 22nd passed off as quickly as the preceding day, the only incident of note being the theft of 5 barrels of beer from a Greek canteen by the boys. They had not seen beer for many a long day & being penniless there was only one way to get it, & they had all they wanted.

We expected to leave on the 23rd & felt sure when orders were issued, we had to be ready to move at 2 hours notice. Colonel Plugge in the absence of General Johnstone took over the duties of Brigadier & Major Alderman became our Battalion commander. General Godleys message of congratulations to the troops, on the occasion of the successful manner in which the evacuation had been carried out, was read to us.

Christmas Eve broke dreary & wet, & our tents were flooded with water. We put in a busy hour or two digging drains around the tents & when this task was finished we went out & had a couple of hours physical drill

That night the bands played carols in different parts of the camp & the boys sang the songs heartily. Christmas day saw us up at 5 am & breakfast was partaken at 6 am. After that we struck camp & marched back to the landing stage at Mudros Harbour. Just at

"noon" we embarked on "S S Varsova" & lay in the harbour until there was not a single man on the Island. Boxing day was the day of our departure, we steamed out at 8 am & headed due south, once we were outside the boom. We had an uneventful although fast voyage to Alexandria where we berthed at the wharf at 4 am on 28th Dec.

Next day we entrained for an unknown destination. Right up to when we reached Zigizig, we reckoned that Zeitoun would be our camp, but once we turned east we knew that we were bound for the Canal Zone. We pulled up at Moaskar near Ismailia, at 11 pm & bivouacked for the night on the sands. Of our subsequent doings in Egypt I have already told you so I will not go over that again.

In Moaskar we settled down for 3 months & the rest was appreciated after our wandering between the Peninsular & Egypt. I have tried to tell you as faithfully as I could the facts surrounding the evacuation as I saw it & if you grow tired of the reading of it, you may be sure that I have grown sick of writing it, especially in view of the lapse of time between the occurrences themselves & the date of writing. I hope however that you may derive a little pleasure from this narrative. Only that fact that I feel compelled to write it.

Jeff Pickerd

Posted 19 December , 2022



Old Sweats

493

Location: Bayside suburbs,
Melbourne, Victoria,
Australia

Interests: History of the
8th Light Horse Regiment
AIF, 1914 - 19 & the
charge at The Nek,
Gallipoli.

Many thanks for publishing Cpl Mitchell's highly informative account of last days at Anzac, to the final evacuation, a very interesting and comprehensive read, and a most valuable addition to the Gallipoli story, greatly appreciated.

Jeff

Crunchy

Posted 19 December , 2022



Old Sweats

1.9k

Location: Australia
Interests: Military History
Strategic Studies

Many thanks for this, and to Jeff for alerting me to it.

Regards

Chris

**Old Sweats**

3.3k

Location:Australia

Interests:Camel Corps and
all WWI subjects

Mates,

It often surprises me how much detail was gone into for the evac.

The close look at the 2 LH Bde showed that the men were grouped into small packets for the evac, over the last week, and each part taken off each night

In the LH they came down to single men and who was staying for the last boat

Just goes to show you sometimes the Army does work

S.B

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